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INTRODUCTION

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Introduction: escaping the politics trap? EU integration pathways beyond the polycrisis

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ABSTRACT

Since 2016, the EU has widely been considered to be in a state of 'polycrisis', where simultaneous, mutually reinforcing challenges threaten the Union's cohesion and legitimacy. Such polycrises may fracture Europe's political space, creating cross-cutting 'polycleavages' that polarise member states and their citizens asymmetrically, thereby constraining the EU's capacity to forge effective compromises on key policy issues. In so doing, they exacerbate the risk of the EU's falling into a multi-level 'politics trap', where negative politicisation of European issues inhibits national leaders from agreeing ambitious solutions in intergovernmental negotiations, while the ensuing deadlock in turn saps the Union's output-based legitimacy and fuels a Eurosceptic 'constraining dissensus'. In this introductory article, we develop an analytical framework elaborating the concepts of polycrises, polycleavages, and politics traps, which we then use to present and interpret the main findings of the contributions to this collection, focused on the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The most important takeaway from the contributions to this collection is that – consistent with our framework – the EU has clearly proved more resilient to the potential negative consequences of politicisation than many commentators had expected at the beginning of this long polycrisis decade.

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KEYWORDS Crisis; politicisation; cleavages; integration; polycrisis; European Union

Introduction

Since Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker introduced the term in 2016, the EU has widely been considered to be in a state of 'polycrisis', where simultaneous, mutually reinforcing challenges 'feed each other, creating a sense of doubt and uncertainty in the minds of our people'.[1]

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In the introduction to a previous collection (Zeitlin et al., 2019), we argued that such polycrises may fracture Europe's political space, creating cross-cutting 'polycleavages' that polarise member states and their citizens asymmetrically, thereby constraining the EU's capacity to forge effective compromises on key policy issues. Europe's first polycrisis was triggered by the overlapping impact of the Euro/sovereign debt crisis (2009–2016) and the refugee/migration crisis (2015–2016), each of which mobilised specific constituencies and opened deep divides across member states.[2] To the extent that such polycleavages become entrenched, we argued that they exacerbate the risk of the EU's falling into a multi-level 'politics trap', where negative politicisation of European issues inhibits national leaders from agreeing ambitious solutions to common problems in intergovernmental negotiations, while the ensuing deadlock in turn saps the Union's output-based legitimacy and fuels a Eurosceptic 'constraining dissensus' (Hooghe & Marks, 2009). Drawing on the contributions to the same collection (Zeitlin & Nicoli, 2019), we suggested in the face of the EU's first polycrisis that a number of strategic pathways might be available to escape such a self-reinforcing politics trap, including positive politicisation and discursive justification of EU policy making, enhanced responsiveness of EU institutions to citizens' concerns, and extended opportunities for differentiation and accommodation of diversity among member states, together with a variety of techniques for avoiding and deflating domestic conflicts over European issues.

How far does this analysis stand up against a second deeper and wider polycrisis? The Covid-19 pandemic first and the Russian invasion of Ukraine next led initially to a simultaneous collapse of the European health, economic, and security outlook. The EU was struck, within less than three years, by its worst recession, its worst health crisis, its worst energy crisis, and its worst security crisis since the end of the Second World War. In an era of dominant constraining dissensus, cross-cutting politicisation of these issues could well have paralyzed the Union, following the scenario of a multi-level politics trap. Yet the responses of the EU and its member states to both the Covid-19 pandemic and the invasion of Ukraine suggest that other outcomes are indeed possible.

In this collection, we reflect critically on the work initiated in 2019 and continue to explore the strategic pathways through which a multi-level polity like the EU may escape a self-reinforcing politics trap in the face of a polycrisis. To do so, we first revisit and re-elaborate the key concepts in our analytical framework, before going on to review the findings of the contributions to this collection and their implications for the EU's capacity to escape a politics trap in its second polycrisis.

Redefining key concepts: polycrises, polycleavages, politics traps, politicisation

Polycrises: Research on crises and their role in European integration is vast. International Relations and comparative politics scholars often define crises as 'critical junctures', i.e., moments of acute pressure or upheaval that result in policy or regime change (Capoccia & Kelemen, 2007; Fioretos, 2011). EU scholars have consistently approached crises as drivers of (dis)integration, studying how their varying characteristics may have a differential impact on the dynamics of EU polity construction (e.g., Haas, 1964; Schmitter, 1970; Jones et al., 2016; Schimmelfennig, 2018, 2023; Ferrara & Kriesi, 2022; Nicoli, 2020). In parallel, constructivist scholarship has looked at the ways crisis discourse is used by actors to justify political decisions or to mobilise political forces (Lawrence, 2014; Snaith & Rosamond, 2015; Hepp et al., 2016; Niemann & Zaun, 2018; Rhinard, 2019). These contributions differ substantially in their definition of crises, and we do not aim to settle that debate here. But regardless of where one stands in this definitional debate, we argue that polycrises have specific characteristics and features in their own right. We define a polycrisis as the simultaneous occurrence or temporal overlap of crises that:

- affect agents participating in a joint governance system;
- are attributed to distinct sources;
- impact different policy fields; and
- have reciprocal consequences for one another, resulting in positive or negative interdependencies.

Polycrises, defined in this way, create both challenges and opportunities for the EU and European integration beyond those normally resulting from individual crisis episodes. On the one hand, interlocking coalitions and crossed vetoes may block EU-level solutions on interdependent issues, while deadlock in one policy field may spill over into others to create a broader systemic crisis for the Union. On the other hand, however, solutions in one crisis policy field may facilitate solutions in another, either simultaneously (in the form of 'grand bargains') or sequentially (what may be termed 'succeeding forward').

Since our earlier contribution, the concept of polycrisis has gone global, popularised by historian and commentator Adam Tooze among others. Thus, for example, Janzwood and Homer-Dixon (2022) define a global polycrisis as 'any combination of three or more systemic risks with the potential to cause a cascading runaway failure of the Earth's natural and social systems that irreversibly and catastrophically degrades humanity's prospects'. Tooze (2022) himself sees the central features of polycrisis as (1) the inability to understand

our current situation as the result of a single, specific causal factor (e.g., capitalism); and (2) the extraordinary scale and breadth of local development that makes it probable that we are about to crash through critical tipping points. Defined in this way, with climate change at its epicentre, the concept of a global polycrisis is thus quite different from that of an EU polycrisis as we are using it here, having more in common with that of a 'permacrisis', in which 'slow-burning' crises like climate change reinforce the effects of 'fast-burning' crises like Covid-19 and the Ukraine war (Zuleeg et al., 2021; https://theconversation.com/permacrisis-what-it-means-and-why-its-word-of-the-year-for-2022-194306; Brown et al., 2023).[3] Other scholars have made similar use of the polycrisis concept, at times explicitly or implicitly adopting (part of) the theoretical framework proposed in our 2019 collection (Nicoli et al., 2022; Rosamond, 2023; Zaki et al., 2024) or have begun to analyze the EU's reaction to multiple simultaneous crises more broadly, without directly engaging with the concept of polycrsis (Roos & Schade, 2023).

Polycleavages: We define polycleavages as cross-cutting divisions on concurrent but distinct policy issues that polarise member states and their citizens asymmetrically and simultaneously, thereby constraining the Union's capacity to reach lasting – or even in some cases stopgap – solutions to urgent problems. These may result in entrenched socioeconomic divisions that in turn leave an enduring mark on institutions and party systems, as proposed by Lipset and Rokkan (1967). But they can also take the form of more transitory fractures, which nonetheless produce important political effects. Polycleavages can emerge not only between member states, resulting in opposing cross-national coalitions that fragment the Union, but also within multiple member states, resulting in similar patterns of politicisation across countries that might align public discourse. Widely discussed examples of such polycleavages include the divisions between northern creditor and southern debtor states in the Euro/sovereign debt crisis; those between front-line (mainly southern) and destination (mainly northern) member states, as well as between supporters (mainly southern) and opponents (mainly eastern) of mandatory relocation of asylum seekers, during the refugee/migration crisis; and the conflicts over the rule of law between central and eastern European member states (especially the Visegrád-4) and the rest of the Union. Such cross-cutting fractures and associated coalitions among member states can become a serious problem for the Union if they become entrenched as long-term cleavages, blocking decision making on intersecting issues and creating policy deadlocks, which could in turn trigger a broader systemic crisis. Crucial empirical questions raised by this conceptual formulation thus concern the stability and durability of the polycleavages observed during the EU's first polycrisis, and how these have responded to a new polycrisis focused on a different set of issues.

Politics traps: both polycrises and polycleavages may exacerbate the risk that the EU might fall into a multi-level politics trap, where:

(1) Negative politicisation of European issues in domestic arenas …
(2) inhibits national leaders from agreeing to ambitious solutions to common problems in intergovernmental negotiations …
(3) while the ensuing policy deadlock saps the EU's output-based legitimacy …
(4) and fuels a Eurosceptic 'constraining dissensus' among domestic publics …
(5) thereby creating a self-reinforcing vicious cycle (Figure 1).

Key empirical questions raised by this conceptual formulation include what strategies may be available to national and EU-level actors to avoid or block each of these steps, thereby escaping the politics trap, and whether their ability to do so may instead initiate a virtuous circle, where success in reaching European solutions to urgent problems instead feeds positive politicisation at domestic level.

Politicisation: Notably, we do not argue – nor did we in 2019 – that politicisation necessarily leads to a politics trap. We acknowledge, and in fact

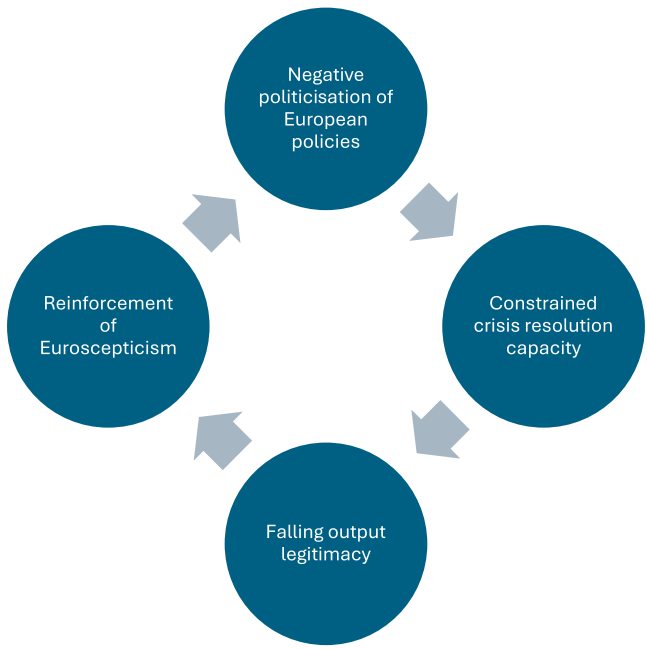

Figure 1. Dynamics of an EU Politics Trap.

Table 1. Forms of EU politicisation.

	Low salience	High salience
Low polarisation	Permissive consensus	Positive or enabling politicisation
High polarisation	Constraining dissensus	Paralyzing dissensus (leading potentially to a politics trap)

extensively examine in this collection, the possibility that politicisation may, at times, result in a positive dynamic for European integration. In our original analysis of a multi-level politics trap, we focused primarily on the risks that negative politicisation, transmitted from the domestic to the EU level, might create for effective Union decision making. But we also explored the possibility, suggested by Vivien Schmidt (2019) among others, that positive politicisation, in the form of more explicit discursive justification of EU policy making and enhanced responsiveness of EU institutions to citizens' preferences and concerns (Rauh, 2019), might help to escape or even reverse the politics trap, by helping to rebuild domestic support for the Union. Drawing on the findings of the papers in this collection, we now think it useful to reconceptualize politicisation of EU policy making not only in terms of variations in its valence (positive or negative), but also in terms of variations along the key dimensions identified by the recent literature on the subject: salience and polarisation.[4] In this respect, as we elaborate below, the contributions to this collection suggest that positive politicisation is most productive when EU policy issues are highly salient at both national and European level, but positions on them are not highly polarised across domestic publics and parties. We illustrate these variations diagrammatically in the table below, relating them to other classic characterisations of the relationship between public opinion and EU policy making (Table 1).

Note that this argument that politicisation of EU policy issues can be positive, on the condition that these issues are highly salient but not polarised domestically, provides an alternative pathway to 'positive politicisation' which differs substantively from those proposed in previous literature, such as: (i) the transposition of domestic political conflicts along left-right lines to the EU level, as advocated by Hix (2008) among others; (ii) authority claims by the European Commission, based on a mandate derived from European elections (Mérand, 2021; Ceron et al., 2024); or (iii) the emergence of an 'empowering dissensus' through agonistic public debate on controversial issues (Oleart, 2021).

Findings of the contributions

a. Did Europe fall into a politics trap during the second polycrisis?

Against the backdrop of this revised theoretical framework, this collection investigates whether the EU fell into a politics trap in response to the

second polycrisis, and if not, why not. Here the answer provided by the contributors is clearly 'no', although some acknowledge that this might be temporary. The supporting evidence can be briefly summarised by reviewing the findings of the contributions concerning developments in the key EU policy fields affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

Bordering: After initial imposition of unilateral restrictions of cross-border movements, member states adjusted their control measures to pandemic problem pressure (measured by monthly Covid death rates), did not politicise border closures along party lines despite high public salience, and followed EU recommendations despite their non-binding character and low Union competences in this field (Freudlsperger et al., 2023; this collection).

Health: Here, too, after initial hesitations, the Commission rapidly convened a Corona Response Team and Advisory Panel on Covid-19, and initiated unprecedented centralised joint procurement of vaccines, which despite early supply problems proved largely effective in meeting member states' needs (Laffan, 2024; this collection); in the longer term, these developments laid the groundwork for an upgraded 'European Health Union', creating a new EU-level Health Emergency Preparedness and Response Authority (HERA) to coordinate medical countermeasures in public health emergencies, while reinforcing the powers and capacities of the European Medicines Authority (EMA) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC) (cf. also Ferrera et al., 2024; Brooks et al., 2023).

Pandemic economic recovery: following the introduction of the European Central Bank (ECB)'s Pandemic Emergency Purchase Programme (PEPP), which helped to contain financial instability by buying private as well as public securities, the Commission and the Council moved rapidly to adopt first the innovative SURE initiative to contain unemployment risks by supporting short-time work schemes, and then following fierce debates in the European Council to agree the massive NextGenerationEU (NGEU) package of grants and loans to member states for national recovery and resilience plans, financed by common EU borrowing, which immediately helped to reduce the spreads on sovereign bonds, while providing medium-term investment funding for social cohesion and the green and digital transitions in exchange for domestic reform commitments (Laffan, 2024; this collection; among the vast literature on the EU's economic response to the pandemic, including NextGenEU and its Recovery and Resilience Facility/RRF, see also Ladi & Tsouharas, 2020; Schelkle, 2021; Fabbrini, 2022; Buti & Fabbrini, 2023; Zeitlin et al., 2023).

Security and defence: Here, as the contributions to this collection show, the EU's response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine was even more rapid, concerted, and innovative than in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic

(Laffan; Hoeffler et al., 2024, this collection). Notable measures include far-reaching sanctions against Russia, renewed and extended 13 times; the repurposing of European Peace Facility (EPF) as an off-budget instrument to provide Ukraine with lethal weapons and military finding; the creation of an EU Military Assistance Mission to Ukraine (EUMAM), overseen by the EU Political and Security Committee with the Military Planning and Conduct Capability (MPCC) as its operational HQ; joint purchasing of ammunition by the Ukraine under the auspices of the European Defence Agency (EDA) through the Act in Support of Ammunition Production (ASAP); adoption of the European Defence Industry Reinforcement through Common Procurement Act (EDIRPA) to financially incentivise joint purchase of weapons by member states more broadly; the Commission's proposal for a European Defence Industrial Strategy (EDIS); and reinforced cooperation between EU and NATO, focused on ensuring complementarities. At a member-state level, Denmark's abandonment of its CSDP opt-out and Finland and Sweden's decision to join NATO reflect an equally unprecedented sea change in domestic public opinion and external policies (Migliorati, 2024; this collection). Even more significant in the longer-term may be the decision to open a pathway to Union membership for Ukraine, which like many of the other steps in the security and defense field enumerated above had little traction on the EU policy agenda prior to the Russian invasion.

Energy: Here, key elements in the EU's unexpectedly effective response to the energy crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine include the adoption of REPowerEU programme attached to the RRF to support member states in reducing dependence on Russian oil and gas while accelerating the green transition, followed by the adoption of 'a market correction mechanism' (MSM) to cap gas prices, following a long and acrimonious debate within the Commission, the Council, and the European Council (Smeets, 2023, this collection).

Many of these innovations, such as collective borrowing to finance non-repayable grants to member states through the RRF, joint procurement of vaccines, the broad scope of sanctions against Russia, and the use of the EPF to buy lethal weapons for Ukraine, 'would have been unimaginable just months before they were agreed' (Laffan). Some of these measures were explicitly temporary, notably the RRF and SURE, though they are nonetheless likely to have a significant impact on future EU policy, for example through the proposed extension of performance-based financing to the Cohesion Policy Funds. Others are explicitly intended to be more permanent, especially the creation of a European Health Union and the expansion of common weapons procurement, though both still require considerable further elaboration. While none of these crisis innovations represent a comprehensive European solution to problems in the relevant policy fields, neither can they be considered lowest-common-denominator agreements,

which would be destined to demonstrate their inadequacy in the face of the next crisis: they can thus be regarded as examples of 'succeeding forward' rather than 'failing forward', in the framework proposed by Jones et al. (2016, 2021; cf. Rhodes, 2021).

It is further noteworthy that none of these crisis-driven innovations involved differentiated integration (though 26 MSs did threaten to proceed without Hungary if Orban refused to agree a multi-year defence funding package for Ukraine). More strikingly still, Denmark's decision to join the CSDP represents a case of de-differentiation, all the more remarkable given the rejection of similar proposals to join the Euro and abandon its Justice and Home Affairs opt-outs in successive national referendums over the preceding three decades (Migliorati, 2024, this collection).

b. Why not? Public opinion and the public sphere

One component of an explanation of why the second polycrisis did not trigger a politics trap concerns the role of domestic public opinion and public debate. Insofar as crises are perceived by domestic publics as both fundamentally symmetrical and highly salient or even existential, they may fuel positive rather than negative politicisation, relaxing the constraining dissensus and untying the hands of national governments, thereby enabling coordinated responses across member states and the adoption of innovative policy measures at EU level.

Crucial for such positive or enabling politicisation of externally triggered crises, as Rauh and Parizek (2024, this collection) argue, is a convergence of public debates across member states, in terms of the salience of the EU and policy issues associated it in national media discussions. They test the key expectation that 'large, symmetrical, exogenous shocks should produce more aligned public EU debates'. Using innovative media analysis techniques, this is precisely what they observe empirically in the case of the Covid-19 pandemic and even more strongly in that of the invasion of Ukraine. In both cases, moreover, polarisation of national public debate along party-political lines was muted, as proxied by reduced party presence in domestic media discussions, albeit with some variation across member states in each crisis. Their evidence clearly points to crises as focal points that capture domestic media debates and align them across Europe, even though these alignments are often short-lived (like other media dynamics in this regard). Since the presence of a pan-European public debate has been often touted as key for the emergence of a genuine public sphere, with important implications for the legitimacy of the EU and more ambitious crisis-response policies (see, in this regard, Bundesverfassungsgericht, 2009: paras. 212, 251), such alignment offers a temporary avenue to escape the politics trap by enabling bolder policy responses, at least for a while.

A second critical debate regarding the effect of polycrises on politicisation is whether they produce 'rallies around the flag', or more specifically, whether they shape citizens' sense of belonging to the same community of fate. This is crucial, since some scholars consider the lack of belonging to a common 'imagined community' as creating the conditions for domestic political entrepreneurs to 'activate' latent national identities and thus constrain European integration (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), validating the age-old understanding of shared identity as a pre-condition for ambitious joint policies. Conversely, others like Sangiovanni (2015) argue that ambitious joint policies may lead to manifested and experienced solidarity, which in turn produces identification. Nicoli et al. (2024, this collection) embed this debate in the context of the second polycrisis, and theorise a number of pathways through which the experience of crises may result in the progressive development of a European identity. They then use a range of semi-experimental techniques on individual-level panel data across five European countries to assess whether crises, and crisis response, show a reinforcement of identification with the EU among citizens. They find a generalised effect across respondents who were most affected throughout the second polycrisis; this effect is even stronger for those who were, or perceived themselves as having been, directly affected by the two successive crises (either in terms of direct experience in the case of Covid or of high concern in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine).

These positive effects on public opinion and public discourse are not necessarily long-lasting, in line with some previous research findings (cf. Negri et al., 2021), though Nicoli *et al*. do show that increased identification with the EU among respondents exposed to Covid-19 in early 2020 was still present at the time of the invasion of Ukraine two years later. In the critical case of public discourse, Rauh and Parizek (2024, this collection) find that the level of cross-national variation in the salience of the EU in mediatised public debates and of the association of specific policy issues with the Union tend to revert to their historic means after a relatively short period of convergence across member states in the pandemic and especially the Ukraine war. Consistently with Rauh and Parizek, Nicoli *et al*. show that crises open windows of opportunity for ambitious action which might be in part self-legitimising, opening a pathway to crisis-resolution beyond the politics trap.

Similarly, Freudlsperger et al. (2023, this collection) discuss the linkage between crisis intensity (problem pressure, in their language) and crisis resolution. In the case of pandemic restrictions on cross-border movement of persons, they show that these control measures correlate positively in the five countries they studied with problem pressure (as measured by monthly Covid deaths per capita) and the closely related salience of the pandemic in party press releases. Conversely, there was no correlation between pandemic problem pressure and polarisation of party positions (except in Poland), indicating that pandemic border policies were not negatively

politicised by domestic political actors. Here too we see a combination of high salience with low polarisation, supporting enabling politicisation in the form of conformity of national border control measures with EU recommendations, including explicit references to them in public communications in several countries, which Freudlsperger *et al*. explain by the perceived exogenous and symmetrical nature of the pandemic, as well as by policy learning from previous crises.

The issue of problem pressure comes back in the contribution by Hetzer and Burgoon (2024, this collection), who show how this modulates and impacts public preferences for specific policy solutions by combining a conjoint experiment with detailed regional data across crises. At a sub-national level, they find that respondents in regions most strongly affected not only by the Covid-19 pandemic, but also by the earlier Euro and migration crises, were more likely than those elsewhere to support more generous and less conditional forms of EU fiscal solidarity. Like the paper by Freudlsperger *et al*., Hetzer and Burgoon's findings indicate that the build-up of polycrises produces an alignment of public preferences, showing how as the problem pressure of various crises began to shift towards a more symmetric distribution (across countries, and within them), the policy preferences of both governments and citizens aligned as well.

Relatedly, Panchuk (2024, this collection) – shows that problem pressure does not simply affect policy preferences concerning crisis resolution, but also the perception of 'who belongs' to the European polity. In the specific case of the Ukraine war, Panchuk argues that crisis resolution can be seen as tied up with the 'who belongs' question, since opening a pathway to EU membership has been framed as Europe standing in solidarity with the invaded country. While enlargement is typically seen as a source of negative politicisation (and even led to a Eurosceptic-led referendum in the Netherlands on the Association Agreement with Ukraine in 2015), the Russian invasion may have generated a wave of solidarity towards Ukraine among European citizens, thus producing positive politicisation in favour of the country's membership. Using a multi-country dataset, Panchuck shows that indeed the 2022 Russian invasion led to increased support for the future EU membership of Ukraine – but not that of other candidate countries (Albania, Serbia, Montenegro, and Turkey) – with the size of the effect rising with the level of concern among respondents, albeit with some variation across the member states covered in the survey (strongly positive in Spain, Italy, and France; marginal in the Netherlands, and negative in Germany).

c. Why not: strategic responses by political leaders

The framing of a crisis as a collective problem requiring a collective response is thus a crucial component of the EU's ability to escape a politics

trap. Shared understandings of a crisis as 'symmetric' and 'existential', affecting all member states in a highly significant way whatever the differences between them, may thus serve as the foundation for positive or 'enabling' politicisation at both national and EU level. The development of such shared understandings may of course reflect objective characteristics of the crisis, such as a common experience of exposure to Covid-19 infection, as emphasised by the contributions of Freudlsperger *et al*., Nicoli *et al*., and Hertzer & Burgoon, or the massively larger military threat posed by the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine compared to the 2014 invasion of Crimea, as emphasised by Hoeffler *et al*. But collective framing by political leaders, as Laffan underlines, is also crucial in shaping public perceptions and debates about the interpretation of crises facing the EU, and thereby preparing the ground for enabling politicisation.

Thus, for example, in spring of 2020, as Laffan observes, the Dutch Finance Minister Wopke Hoekstra tried to frame the economic challenge of the Covid-19 pandemic in similar terms to that of the Eurocrisis, demanding an inquiry into why some member states had not created sufficient financial buffers to deal with unexpected shocks. But this attempt to blame some member states for their lack of fiscal space in the face of an external shock met with a ferocious response in the media and the European Council from other national leaders, especially from southern European countries, which highlighted the symmetrical nature of the crisis, undermining the Dutch government's preference for prioritising national responses and avoiding the issuance of common debt. Similarly, as Freudlsperger *et al*. show, member states' initial response to the pandemic was to impose unilateral restrictions on cross-border movements of persons and goods, which could have triggered a politics trap, before governments agreed on a symmetrical framing of the crisis and began to follow Council recommendations on the coordination of national border closure measures. The convergence of domestic media debates which Rauh and Parizek report was thus not a simple reflex of cross-national correlations in Covid infection and mortality rates, but also of concerted efforts by political leaders to frame the pandemic as an exogenous and symmetric crisis demanding a solidaristic response, exemplified by media interviews given by Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conti in other EU member states urging EU support for his country as its first and worst-hit victim (Schelkle, 2021).

In the case of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, there was a stronger consensus from the outset among EU and national leaders on the existential nature of the crisis and the necessity of a collective response, as both Laffan and Hoeffler *et al*. demonstrate. But even there, Hungary's Viktor Orbán did not share this common framing and only reluctantly agreed to the adoption of a unified EU position, which he has periodically sought to undermine, withdrawing only in the face of concerted political and material pressure from the

European Council and the Commission. Conversely, other member states, notably the Baltics and Poland, already viewed Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea as an existential threat, to which they would have liked to see a much more robust collective EU response at the time.

Crucial to the EU's capacity to avoid falling into a politics trap in the second polycrisis was the willingness and ability of EU and national leaders to reach consensus not only on a shared problem frame, but also on what Laffan calls a common action frame, in terms of the development of specific policy solutions, from joint vaccine purchases and collective borrowing for the NGEU package to far-reaching sanctions against Russia, the use of the European Peace Facility to purchase lethal weapons, and the decision to open a pathway for Ukraine to EU membership, among many other unprecedented measures discussed earlier. Beyond their immediate practical impact, these innovative policy measures helped to mitigate the impact of the crises by signalling the Union's collective will to act, as in the case of Draghi's famous 'whatever it takes' speech during the Eurocrisis. Thus, for example, announcement of the NGEU package itself contributed to sharply reducing the spreads on member states' sovereign bonds long before any new money found its way to national treasuries (Jones, 2021). Similarly, agreement on the adoption of a 'market correction mechanism' in the spring of 2023, as Smeets argues, sent a strong political signal that the EU was united in refusing to pay more than a set price for natural gas, thereby helping to stabilise the market without actually needing to be activated (like Draghi's famous promise), in part because other solutions like demand reduction and joint purchasing were already reducing the necessity of a price cap.

The development of these innovative policy solutions in turn depended not only on discursive framing which reinforced an understanding of the Union as a community of fate, but also on intensive cooperation between national leaders operating through the European Council and the European Commission as a supranational actor, along with other components of the EU's complex institutional ecology such as Council working parties, committees of national officials, European agencies, and the ECB. While the Commission played a vital role in both crises in taking autonomous action within its competences and using its expertise to design new policy instruments, the European Council served in Laffan's words as 'the guiding arena that drove EU collective action' by tasking the Commission and the Council to prepare legislation and develop policy solutions, and using its political authority to reach agreement on contentious new measures which broke longstanding taboos (including by reinterpreting key clauses of the Treaties, as in the case of NGEU: for contrasting interpretations of the legality of this move, see De Witte, 2021; Leino-Sandberg & Ruffert, 2022).

Even in the case of the energy crisis triggered by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, where a joint response to rising gas prices proved extremely hard

to agree because of sharp divisions not only between member states but also within the Commission itself, the European Council's public determination to 'remain seized of the matter', can be understood as a form of positive politicisation, keeping up pressure from the 'control room' on the 'machine room' actors to come up with a technically workable solution, while signalling to both citizens and the market that the EU could not be allowed to fail on an issue of such importance. Thus, as Smeets argues, the process of interaction between EU institutions within the 'EUCO system' can itself become an important part of the solution to a crisis, even where member states and the Commission are deeply divided, and substantive agreement is difficult to reach.

Strategic agency by national leaders at the domestic level, as Bokhorst and Schoeller (2024, this collection) show, is no less important in avoiding – or 'springing' – a politics trap in the face of a new (poly)crisis, by deliberately lowering or raising 'audience costs' through interactions with parliaments and the media. Even in member states like the Netherlands, where European issues are highly politically salient in the media, and parliaments regularly adopt resolutions seeking to tie governments' hands in EU-level negotiations, national leaders can enhance their room for reaching acceptable compromises through strategic framing of both potential threats and concessions obtained in communication with domestic audiences. Conversely, in other member states like Austria, where both media salience and parliamentary pressure on European issues are weaker, government leaders may seek to raise their domestic political profile, while simultaneously reinforcing their position in EU-level negotiations, by strategically invoking domestic constraints. Thus in the Covid-19 pandemic, as Bokhorst and Schoeller demonstrate through careful process tracing, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte successfully sought to loosen tight domestic constraints against the NGEU compromise when he realised that the Netherlands could not block it alone by using the threat of Corona/Eurobonds as a decoy in Parliament, while touting his accomplishments in attaching strict performance and rule-of-law conditionalities to the RRF. At the same time, Austrian Prime Minister Sebastian Kurtz used inflated claims about domestic pressures to strengthen his hand in obtaining concessions in these negotiations on related issues such as contributions to the EU budget, while presenting himself as an effective defender of national interests at home. In each case, however, the extent to which such national leaders use their strategic room for maneuver to avoid or trigger politics traps in EU-level negotiations depends not only on domestic factors, such as the position of their coalition partners, but also on the position of other member states in the European Council and the availability of potential allies to block unwanted integration initiatives.

In this respect, as Laffan argues, Brexit may be seen as a 'hinge' between the first polycrisis (the Euro/sovereign debt and refugee/migration crises), when the EU seemed constantly at risk of falling into a politics trap, and the second polycrisis (Covid and Ukraine), when the Union responded collectively to what were perceived as exogenous, symmetrical, and existential threats by taking unprecedented steps towards further integration. Brexit, as analyzed elsewhere by Laffan and Telle (2023), was a crucial moment when national leaders responded to a perceived existential threat – the decision by a large member state to leave, which if mishandled could have triggered a cascade of further departures – by recommitting to the Union, recognising the value and importance to all of the EU's collective power, and maintaining a staunchly united front in negotiations with the UK, even where individual interests differed. Brexit, as Hoeffler *et al*. emphasise, likewise facilitated the EU's collective response to subsequent crises, by removing a key veto player opposed to further integration steps, whether in terms of security and defence or in terms of common borrowing and the use of the Union budget to support member states' recovery from the pandemic.

The EU's responses to both the Covid and Ukraine crises, as a number of the contributions to this collection suggest, can also be seen as a progressive learning process, building on the positive lessons of the Union's successful response to Brexit, as well as on negative lessons from the first polycrisis. Beyond specific policy lessons from previous crises, this progressive learning process, Laffan suggests, has led to the reinforcement of a series of EU polity norms of unity, solidarity, and the collective responsibility to act, which in turn helped the Union to avoid a politics trap in the second polycrisis. Such emergent policy norms, as Laffan emphasises, condition collective action, making collaborative EU-level responses to subsequent crises more likely, without determining the outcome, which will depend on the strategic agency of key actors working through the Union's dense and evolving institutional ecology.

More generally, the temporal succession of EU polycrises can itself be seen as a sequential process, in which successful responses to one crisis reinforce the Union's capacity and commitment to resolve the next, as can be seen in the trajectory from Brexit to Covid to the Ukraine to the energy crisis. Avoiding a politics trap in one crisis thus enhances the likelihood – but not of course the certainty – of avoiding it in the next, thereby transforming the cross-sectoral spillovers created by a polycrisis from a negative to a positive force for further integration.

d. Why not: the fragility of political coalitions in the face of shifting polycrises

What finally of the relationship between polycleavages and politics traps in the second polycrisis? Cross-cutting divisions and coalitions between

member states, as we argued in the previous section, are only a serious problem for the Union if they become entrenched into long-term cleavages, blocking decision making on intersecting policy issues, and thereby creating deadlocks which could in turn trigger a broader systemic crisis. The contributions to this collection suggest instead that fractures and alliances among member states have proved less stable and enduring than appeared might be the case in the wake of the Euro and refugee/migration crises, above all because a new polycrisis focused on a different set of issues has fragmented and disrupted earlier coalitional alignments. We illustrate this argument by briefly reviewing the findings of the collection on three of the most prominent member state coalitions in EU policy making: the 'frugals', the Nordics, and the Visegrád-4.

The division between northern creditor and southern debtor states, which coincides in part with that between net contributors and net beneficiaries to the Union budget, has been a recurrent source of tension in EU policy making since the Euro/sovereign debt crisis. But as contributions to this collection by Eihmanis, Laffan, Bokhorst and Schoeller observe, this division has not crystallized into stable political coalitions over the past decade. Thus, the New Hanseatic League, comprising Nordic and Baltic countries along with Ireland and the Netherlands, which was initiated by the Dutch government following the loss of the UK as a reliable ally on budgetary and trade issues after Brexit, did not survive the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic. Once Germany, historically the strongest opponent of Eurobonds and a 'transfer union', joined France in supporting common borrowing for pandemic recovery grants to heavily indebted member states during the spring of 2020, the 'frugal four', an alternative Dutch-led alliance of small, fiscally conservative countries (comprising Austria, Sweden, and Denmark, with informal backing from Finland) could no longer block the movement towards collective solidarity financed though the EU budget. Hence they concentrated instead on influencing the details of the NGEU package, by balancing grants with loans and attaching conditionalities to member-state funding, while obtaining reductions in their national contributions to the multi-annual Union budget. In so doing, as Bokhorst and Schoeller show, frugal leaders like Rutte and Kurz skillfully managed their interactions with domestic parliaments and media to avoid constraining red lines and enhance their individual ability to extract concessions in EU negotiations.

The Nordics are not generally considered a cohesive and obstructive bloc in EU policy making. But as Migliorati's paper in particular shows, the response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine has resulted in a striking reduction of these countries' historically distinctive position in European security and defense policy, as Denmark abandoned its CSDP opt-out following a successful referendum, while both Finland and Sweden decided to join NATO. Only in the case of Norway, which remains outside the EU, while participating actively in both

NATO and CSDP, did the Ukraine War not precipitate an overt change in the country's defense arrangements. Rather than creating new cleavages, the Nordic response to the Ukraine war has instead helped to overcome long-standing divisions and integrate Denmark, Finland, and Sweden more closely into the European security and defense mainstream.

Perhaps the most striking example of the disruptive effects of the second polycrisis on established cross-national coalitions in EU policy making is that of the Visegrád-4, which is often considered as a relatively homogenous bloc aggressively asserting its shared identity and interests to challenge the EU on politically salient issues such as refugee/migration policy and the rule of law (e.g., S. Fabbrini, 2023; Kriesi et al., 2024). But as Eihmanis (2024, this collection) argues, coalitional dynamics within the V-4 have taken very different forms over the past two decades depending on the nature of the policy issues at stake and the form of their domestic politicisation. Thus as Eihmanis shows through a detailed reconstruction of cross-sectoral, over-time patterns, V-4 cooperation has been most effective in influencing EU policy making through issue-specific distributive bargaining in low-salience areas such as cohesion funding where there is little domestic polarisation, as well as through joint politicisation of high-salience, highly polarised issues where this fitted the strategies of domestic political leaders, as in the case of asylum and migration. Conversely, the V-4 has historically sought to downplay or avoid high-salience issues like security and defence, where its members are sharply divided by historical perceptions of national geopolitical interests, notably as regards relations with Russia. The latter's invasion of Ukraine, as Eihmanis demonstrates, has brought these longstanding geopolitical differences to the fore, shattering the cohesion of the V-4 and undermining its collective capacity to influence EU policy making, even if some continuing cooperation remains possible on low-salience distributive issues such as tariffs on Ukrainian agricultural imports. At the same time, moreover, the rule-of-law conditionalities attached to NGEU and cohesion funding during the Covid-19 pandemic have dramatically raised the costs of challenging EU values in both economic and political terms, enhancing the isolation of Orban's Hungary, especially since the change of government in Poland. Even more clearly than in the cases of the frugals and the Nordics, the fragmentation of the V-4 in the wake of the pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine thus graphically illustrates how a new polycrisis focused on a different set of issues can disentrench polycleavages emerging from a previous polycrisis, thereby helping the EU to avoid falling into a politics trap.

Conclusions

This collection builds upon and develops further the analytical framework we originally proposed in 2019. The most important takeaway from the

contributions presented in this collection is that the EU has clearly proved more resilient to the combined effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine than might have been expected from the first polycrisis created by the overlapping impact of the Euro and refugee/migration crises. Central to the dynamics of this second polycrisis, so far, has been the capacity of EU and national leaders to frame the challenges at stake as impacting the entirety of Europe, and then to muster the necessary political support to follow up with resolute policy action. Many contributions in this collection show that such collective framing of the pandemic and Ukraine war as symmetrical and existential threats to the EU and its member states, thereby reducing the level of polarisation in highly salient crisis-response debates, has resulted in a successful, even if perhaps temporary, dynamic of positive or enabling politicisation (cf. the upper right-hand cell of Table 1 above). Following Laffan, we observe that the EU-level learning process about how to respond to such crises was particularly shaped by Brexit and its aftermath. Indeed, as she argues, Brexit can be seen as a hinge between the two polycrises, which has generated a practice of joint problem framing, together with a set of emergent polity norms of unity, solidarity, and collective responsibility to act, on which the Commission and the European Council were able to build in mustering an effective policy response to the Covid-19 crisis and the Russian invasion of Ukraine.

The EU's ability to avoid falling into a politics trap in the second polycrisis, as suggested earlier, can thus be understood as a sequential process in which successful responses to one crisis reinforce the Union's capacity and commitment to resolve the next, thereby transforming the cross-sectoral spillovers created by a polycrisis from a negative to a positive force for further integration. At the same time, however, there is no evidence that such diachronic spillovers of new integration measures from one crisis to the next have enhanced member-state leaders' appetite for a synchronic 'grand bargain', as can be seen from the Council's reluctance to take up the proposals for Treaty reform tabled by the European Parliament in the wake of the Conference on the Future of Europe (Duff, 2023; Vasques, 2023).

But valuable as they may be, the collective problem-framing practices and polity norms which have emerged from the EU's response to Brexit and the second polycrisis cannot be taken for granted in the longer term. Instead, they need to be continuously cultivated and reaffirmed by EU and national leaders in the face of new challenges, both external and internal, especially since as several of the contributions to this collection suggest, polycrisis-driven convergence of public debates across member states, 'rally around the flag' effects, and enhanced attachment of citizens to Europe may tend to fade away relatively quickly. Failure to do so may in turn create new opportunities for negative politicisation of salient European policy issues by actors seeking to polarise and divide the Union, thereby enhancing the danger of

falling into a politics trap as a result of a 'paralyzing dissensus' in EU-level decision making (cf. the lower-right hand cell of Table 1, and the diagram in Figure 1).

Accordingly, a number of potential stumbling blocks still have the potential to derail the EU's capacity to weather the second polycrisis and avoid a paralyzing drift into a politics trap. Some of these may result from the natural course of democratic politics. Thus, for example, national electoral cycles – which remain quite unsynchronised across the Union – will lead to alternation of parties in power and replacement of government leaders. In turn, the European Council will welcome new members, sometimes representing populist challenger parties, who have not (yet) been socialised into its collective problem-framing and action response practices and may see themselves as bearers of a domestic mandate to change how Europe works.

Similarly, the growing linkages between national and European electoral political cycles may serve as a channel for transmitting domestic polarisation into EU-level decision making. A striking example of such a scenario can be seen in the farmers' protest movements of 2023–2024, which by raising fears of large-scale losses by to right-wing populist challengers in both national and European elections, has triggered a major backlash against the European Green Deal by centre-right governments and parties in the Council and the European Parliament. This backlash, in turn, has resulted in the watering down of some flagship Green Deal measures and the outright abandonment of others, including the proposed Sustainable Use of Pesticides (SUR) Directive, which Commission President von der Leyen acknowledged had become 'a symbol of polarisation' (Mathews, 2024; von der Leyen, 2024).[5]

Other threats to the EU's collective response consensus ('collective power Europe', in Laffan's words) may come from future crises which genuinely fragment the political space both between and within countries. A notable recent example, not discussed in this collection (which was conceived and developed before the dramatic events of October 2023), has been the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel, and the disproportionate Israeli response that followed. Even though the EU has limited competences in foreign policy, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, displayed an initial burst of unilateral leadership by pledging unconditional support for Israel, assuming perhaps that European Council members would follow her lead as they did during both the Covid-19 and Ukraine crises. Instead, she faced immediate pushback by several national leaders, and shortly thereafter, from Josep Borrell, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security. Importantly, while the Israel-Gaza conflict of 2023–2024 has a similar 'impact' on all European countries, actor framing has differed substantively across and within member states, fracturing the public, the European Council, and to some extent even the Commission. While, so far, the

European Council has succeeded in avoiding a 'contagion' of divisions to the Ukraine war, the resurgent salience of the Israel-Palestine issue, on which the EU has long been deeply divided (Akgül-Açikmeşe et al., 2023; Jensenhaugen et al., 2020), has clearly shifted leaders', public, and media attention, providing an opening for adversarial political forces to change the narrative.

Conversely, other developments may also provide an opportunity for European leaders to strengthen the EU's collective response consensus. For instance, a second, radicalised Trump Presidency could represent for European defense integration what the 'Nixon Shock' and the US withdrawal from the gold standard represented for European monetary integration: a cultural shock first and foremost, and the beginning of a period of both uncertainty and fervent institutional attempts to find a European solution. As both Hoeffler *et al*. and Laffan observe, such a development might ultimately force the hand of some reluctant member states, especially on the eastern NATO flank, preparing the ground for a qualitative forward leap in European defense cooperation, as the US commitment to NATO could be placed in doubt.

Taken together, the contributions to this collection demonstrate that even in situations characterised by acute, overlapping, and sequential crises, solutions can emerge if EU political actors collectively seek a way out. The distinctive features of EU governance, which some (not without reason) see as obstacles to more classic statist forms of crisis management, allow for greater flexibility in tailoring joint policy responses to perceived threats without necessarily resulting in clear and easily politicised losses of sovereignty for member states. The latest polycrisis has in fact shown that the European way of 'creating a de-facto solidarity' (Schuman 1950) without formal state building can be effective even in the face of fundamental challenges to the continent's wellbeing and security. Key to this success, as the contributions to this collection show, is the collective will of European leaders to stand together, exploit the institutional pathways offered by the EU's distinctive governance setup, and avoid falling into a politics trap. Whether this combination of collective leadership and institutional creativity will prove sufficient as global politics enters a new and more dangerous phase remains to be seen, but the EU has already proven to be a more resilient and resourceful system of governance than many commentators had expected at the onset of this long polycrisis decade.

Notes

1. Juncker (2016). As Adam Tooze and others have pointed out, Juncker borrowed the term from complexity theorist Edgar Morin (Tooze, 2022; https://polycrisis.org/lessons/where-did-the-term-polycrisis-come-from/).
2. In his 2016 speech, Juncker also invoked security threats within and beyond the EU, along with Brexit.

3. The Collins English Dictionary, which selected 'permacrisis' as its word of the year for 2022 defines it as 'an extended period of instability and insecurity, esp one resulting from a series of catastrophic events', https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/permacrisis. For the distinction between fast and slow-burning crises, see Seabrooke and Tsingou (2019).
4. Following recent empirical work on EU crises, we omit the third dimension of politicization – actor expansion – from our analysis, as it is more relevant to studying long-term trends and debates: cf. Hutter and Kriesi (2019, n. 4; Kriesi et al., 2024, pp. 14–15). On the three dimensions of politicization, see de Wilde et al. (2016).
5. For the broader dynamic of 'contagious Euroscepticism', in which rising domestic support for radical-right challenger parties triggers shifts in the position of mainstream centre-right parties on hot-button EU policy issues such as migration, see Meijers (2017).

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